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Wildfowl Decoys in Essex.

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WILD-FOWL DECOYS IN ESSEX.

By J. E. HARTING, F.L.S., F.Z.S. (Member of the British Ornithologists' Union).

[*Read February 26th*, 1887.]

With Plate I.

ALTHOUGH the investigations carried on by any Natural History Society need not necessarily be confined to objects within the county, or district, in which the Society has been formed, it is only natural that these should occupy the chief share of attention, since they possess a greater interest for members of the Society than topics having no special relation to the county.

From this point of view it has occurred to me that some account of wild-fowl decoys in Essex might be acceptable to the Society. especially as I have reason to think that the subject may be new to many.

We have only to look at the map of Europe to see how favourably the county of Essex is situated to afford refuge to the vast flocks of wild-fowl which, migrating southward at the approach of winter, come to us from Scandinavia and countries further north, as well as from the opposite shores of Holland.

Looking more particularly at a map of the county, we cannot fail to be struck at the number of important rivers (no less than six) which empty themselves into the sea along its coast, forming wide estuaries and tidal harbours, some of them studded with islands, and bordered in some places for many miles with extensive marshes and mud-flats, which afford attractive feeding ground to many species of wild ducks as well as to large flocks of Brent geese.

One island in particular, Foulness Island, was formerly notable for the colony of Black-headed Gulls, or "*Puits*" as they were locally termed, which annually resorted to breed there. It is thus quaintly noticed by Fuller ("Worthies," page 318):—

"There is an island of some two hundred acres near Harwich, in the parish of Little-Okeley, in the manour of Matthew Gilly, Esq., called the *Puit* Island, from *Puits*, in effect the sole inhabitants thereof. Some affirm them called in Latine *Upupæ*, whilst others maintain that the Roman language doth not reach the name, nor land afford the bird. On Saint George his day precisely they pitch on the island, seldome laying fewer than four or more than six eggs. Great their love to their young ones; for though against foul weather they make to the main land (a certain prognostick of tempests), yet they always weather it out in the island when hatching their young ones, seldome sleeping whilst they sit on their eggs (afraid, it seems, of spring-tides), which signifieth nothing as to securing their eggs from the inundation, but is an argument of their great affection. Being young they consist onely of bones, feathers, and lean flesh, which hath a raw gust

of the sea. But poulterers take them then, and feed them with gravel and curds (that is physic and food), the one to scour, the other to fat them, in a fortnight, and their flesh thus recruited is most delicious."

The island here referred to, I believe, is Foulness, or as originally spelled Fowl Ness[1]; but how long the gulls continued to breed there I have been unable to discover. Some have supposed that the birds referred to by Fuller were not gulls, but lapwings. Merrett, for instance, in his "Pinax" (1666), takes this view:—

"*Vanellus*, the lapwing, bastard plover, or pewit. Insula quædam ab iis nomen fortitur in Essexia. Huc enim migrant præcise ad diem Divo Georgio sacrum. *Vide* Fuller. 318."

Charleton also, in his "Onomasticon Zoicon" (1668) makes a somewhat similar statement, and names the island, "Nomen suum *Foulness* nempe, hoc est avium promontorium."

Both Merrett and Charleton, however, appear to have been deceived by the name "*Puit*," which they took to refer to the plover, but which Fuller evidently intended to apply to the gull.

Viewing the county in its present condition, intersected by railways, with thousands of acres of marsh land reclaimed, drained and cultivated, we can form but a faint notion of what a paradise for wild-fowl the Essex coast must have been before an increased population and extended civilization narrowed the limits of their domain. It is difficult to realize the state of things which existed before the introduction of shot guns in the sixteenth century, when wild-fowl were killed with the cross-bow, with trained hawks, or with such kinds of snares and nets as the ingenuity of man at that period could devise; and we have no better proof of their former abundance than the number of decoys which once existed for their capture. Many persons seem to be of opinion that decoys in England are amongst the things of the past, and are surprised to learn that at the present time there are about forty still in use in different parts of the country, while at least 140 others are known to have formerly existed.

The great success which attended the working of decoys in the olden time was due partly to the greater number of wild-fowl which resorted to the places where they were constructed, partly to the absolute stillness which prevailed in these out of the way spots, and partly to the very ingenious contrivance which enabled the fowler to capture a large number of birds at a time without in the least

[1] The island referred to by Fuller is more generally identified with Pewit Island in Great Oakley parish, between Walton-on-Naze and Harwich. See Messrs. Fitch and Christy's Paper "A Visit to an Essex Gullery," in this part of the ESSEX NATURALIST.—ED.

FIG. 1.—THE DECOY POND AS SEEN FROM A PIPE.

alarming the remainder of the flock. The method indeed may still be practised, but the fowl do not come in anything like their former numbers to be caught.

The form of decoy as we now know it was probably (like many another invention) the result of gradual improvement in earlier and simpler methods of capture. The "tunnel net," for example, was a more ancient and primitive device for taking partridges and wild ducks. This net, as its name implies, was shaped like a tunnel, gradually diminishing in size until it terminated in a bag or purse from which, when the birds were once driven in, there was no escape. On each side of the entrance to the tunnel upright nets about eighteen inches high stretched away like wings, and being set in a V shape, with the tunnel at the apex, the birds were slowly but surely directed towards what seemed to them the only aperture for escape, namely, the entrance to the tunnel. Once within the entrance return was hopeless; for the fowler hastened up, and driving them forward, easily secured them at the other end.

But why, it may be asked, did the birds not rise and fly away in good time? For two reasons: in the case of partridges they were driven so slowly by the fowler behind a "stalking-horse" that they suspected no danger, and merely ran gradually away from him towards the net; in the case of wild ducks an unfair advantage was taken by driving them when they were moulting, and had temporarily lost the use of their flight feathers.[2] In this case, if surprised in the marshes, or in pools where the water was too shallow to enable them to escape by diving, they might be driven like a flock of sheep to their destruction, and when several hundred yards of netting were used, and a number of beaters employed, the quantity of wild-fowl thus captured in a day was something extraordinary.

Thus Willughby tells us in his "Ornithology" (1678), that sometimes as many as four hundred boats were used for driving wild-fowl, and that he knew of as many as 4,000 birds being taken at one drive in Deeping Fen, Lincolnshire. Pennant, in his "British Zoology," states that 31,200 ducks were taken in one season in ten decoys near Wainfleet; and Gough, in his edition of Camden's "Britannia," mentions that in 1720, three thousand ducks were to his knowledge driven into nets at one time.

[2] For some account of the moulting of the flight feathers in the common wild duck, the reader may be referred to Waterton's "Essays on Natural History" (first series, pp. 196-202), Baron d'Hamonville, "Bulletin de la Société Zoologique de France" (vol. ix., pp. 101-106), and Harting, "Zoologist," 1886, pp. 228-233.

This wholesale destruction of wild-fowl, carried on at a season of the year when they were unable to save themselves by flight, threatened their speedy extermination, and legislative measures were adopted to prevent it. Even so long ago as 1534, in Henry the Eighth's time, an Act of Parliament entitled "An Act to avoide distruction of wilde fowle" was passed with the express object of appointing a "close time" for these birds. The preamble to this act is thus quaintly worded :—

"Where before this time ther hath ben within this realme great plentie of wilde fowle, as ducks, mallardes, wigeons, teales, wild geese, and divers other kinds of wild fowle, wherby not onely the king's most honourable household, but also the houses of the noblemen and prelates of this realme have ben furnished for the necessarie expences of the same houses at convenient prices, but also al markets of the same realme were sufficiently furnished with wild fowle, there to be sold in such wise that such as were mete to make provision of the same for their houses might at resonable prices at the same markets be therof provided. Neverthelesse divers persons next inhabiting in the countries and places within this realme, where the substance of the same wildfowle hath ben accustomed to brede, have in the sommer season at such time as the saide olde fowle be moulted and not replenished with fethers to flie, nor the yong fowle fully fethered perfectly to flie, have by certaine nettes and other ingins and policies yerely taken grete numbre of the same fowle in such wise that the brede of wilde fowle is almoste thereby wasted and consumed, and daily is like more and more to waste and consume, if remedie be not therefor provided."

The statute accordingly went on to provide that any person or persons taking wild-fowl with nets or other engines between the last day of May and the last day of August should, on conviction, suffer a year's imprisonment, and forfeit for every fowl so taken fourpence Another section of the same Act made it illegal to take their eggs.

No restriction was placed upon the capture of wild-fowl at any other time of year than that above specified, and man's ingenuity soon contrived a mode of making amends in winter for the opportunities lost in summer, by taking in decoys large numbers not only of the home-bred wild-fowl which had escaped destruction earlier in the year, but of the migrating flocks arriving at the commencement of the cold weather.

So far as can be judged from imperfect descriptions, the form of decoy (introduced into England, it is said, by Sir William Wodehouse in the reign of James I.) was probably much the same as that used at the present day, allowing for certain modifications and improvements which time would be sure to develop.[3]

[3] The practice is doubtless of Dutch origin; the word *decoy* being in fact a corruption of the Dutch *eendc-kooi* signifying a "duck-cage."

For the benefit of those who may never have seen a decoy, it may be well, perhaps, to describe briefly its construction and management.

Imagine, then, a pool of a few acres in extent lying in a quiet out of the way spot, far from any high road, and if surrounded by trees all the better (see Fig. 1, in which we get a glimpse of a decoy pond as seen from a pipe).[4] Marshes by the sea, especially on the east coast, were found to be most favourable for such a purpose, since fresh-water pools in such situations at once attract foreign fowl coming in from the sea on their first arrival.

Having selected the pool, the next thing to be done is to cut the "pipes," as they are termed, up which the ducks have to be decoyed. These "pipes," which may vary in number according to the extent and shape of the pool, are simply net-covered ditches of a peculiar shape, something like a cow's horn; that is to say, wider at the end nearest the pond than at the other end, and gently curving throughout their entire length. The reason for having several such "pipes" to a decoy is that the fowl may be taken when the wind, no matter from what point of the compass, is blowing down the pipe towards the pond. The reason for making the "pipes" curved is that if they were straight, and the ducks could see the further end, they would at once suspect a trap, and never enter them (see Fig. 2, representing the mouth of a pipe).

Let us suppose, then, that three, four, or five such pipes have been cut. These are arched over at intervals with hoops of wood, or iron (if expense be no object), and over these is stretched a strong netting, which tapers gradually towards the far end of the pipe, and terminates in a sort of bag or purse in which the fowl are eventually taken (see Fig. 3). As it is absolutely necessary that the decoyman should be concealed from view of the ducks on the pool, a series of screens made of reeds, and set one behind another, are fixed at intervals along the side of each "pipe" (these are shown in Fig. 2, to the left). A few tame ducks, taught to come at a whistle to be fed, a few handfuls of grain, and a small fox-coloured dog, and the decoyman is ready to begin operations.

Selecting his "pipe" according to the direction of the wind, he throws a handful of grain over a screen into the pipe, and whistles. The wind carries the grain towards the mouth of the pipe, the tame ducks come eagerly to feed, and the wild ones getting an occasional

[4] The three excellent illustrations of Decoys are from an article on "An East Anglian Decoy," by Mr. G. C. Davies, in the "Art Journal" for 1882.—Ed.

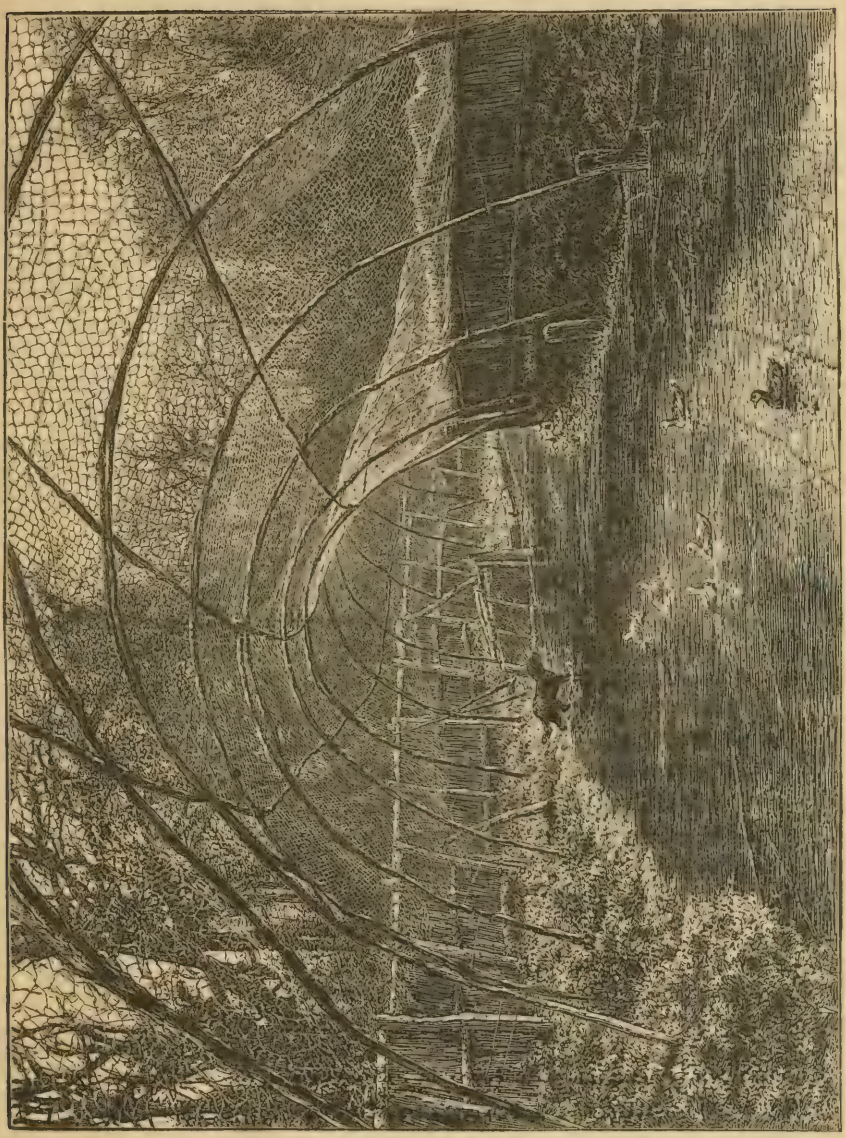

FIG. 2.—THE MOUTH OF A PIPE.

mouthful as the grain drifts by them or towards them, gradually discover that the nearer they swim towards the mouth of a pipe the more plentiful does food become. Unsuspectingly they enter the wide mouth, so wide as to convey no suggestion of a trap; and then the decoyman's little dog comes into play. Taught to dodge in and out of the reed screens to fetch a piece of bread or biscuit, he shows himself momentarily to the ducks in the pipe, and disappears when returning to his master. Wild-fowl are eminently curious, and their curiosity proves fatal to them. They behave towards the dog exactly as cattle would do—as long as he retreats from them they follow him. Perhaps from his colour they take him for a fox, their common enemy, and fancy they are driving him away. At any rate they follow him up the pipe until, having passed the first reed screen, they are virtually cut off from the rest of the flock. At this juncture the decoyman shows himself to the ducks in the pipe, though not to those on the pool. He makes no noise, but merely waves his arms, and the frightened fowl, afraid to return past him to the open water, instantly rise on the wing and fly up the pipe, following its curve in the vain hope that it will lead to freedom. Instead of that, however, it leads to the bag net; and the reason of there being no "hereafter" for wild ducks is explained by their having their *necks twirled* in this!

Such, briefly speaking, is the *modus operandi.* The whole business is conducted so quietly that the wild-fowl on the main water are never alarmed, and time after time the bag net is filled and emptied.

In hard winters when there may be several hundred ducks upon the pool in a day, great execution take place if the decoyman knows his work and has a good dog. At a celebrated decoy at Ashby, in Lincolnshire, which I visited in 1886, as many as 113 ducks have been taken *at one time*, and altogether 248 were taken there the same day.

At the present time, as above stated, there are existing in different parts of England about forty decoys which are still used, while as many as 140 others are known to have existed formerly, and to be now dismantled or out of repair. The counties in which the greatest number of decoys existed are, as might be expected from their situation, Lincolnshire (39), Norfolk (26), and Essex (29).

The position of those in *Essex* may be seen on referring to the map which I have prepared to illustrate these remarks (see Plate I.); the sites of former decoys being marked by a red spot, and the only three now existing being indicated by a small cross.[5]

[5] We are indebted to Mr. Harting for a contribution towards the cost of this map, and also for having the red dots inserted at his own expense.—Ed.

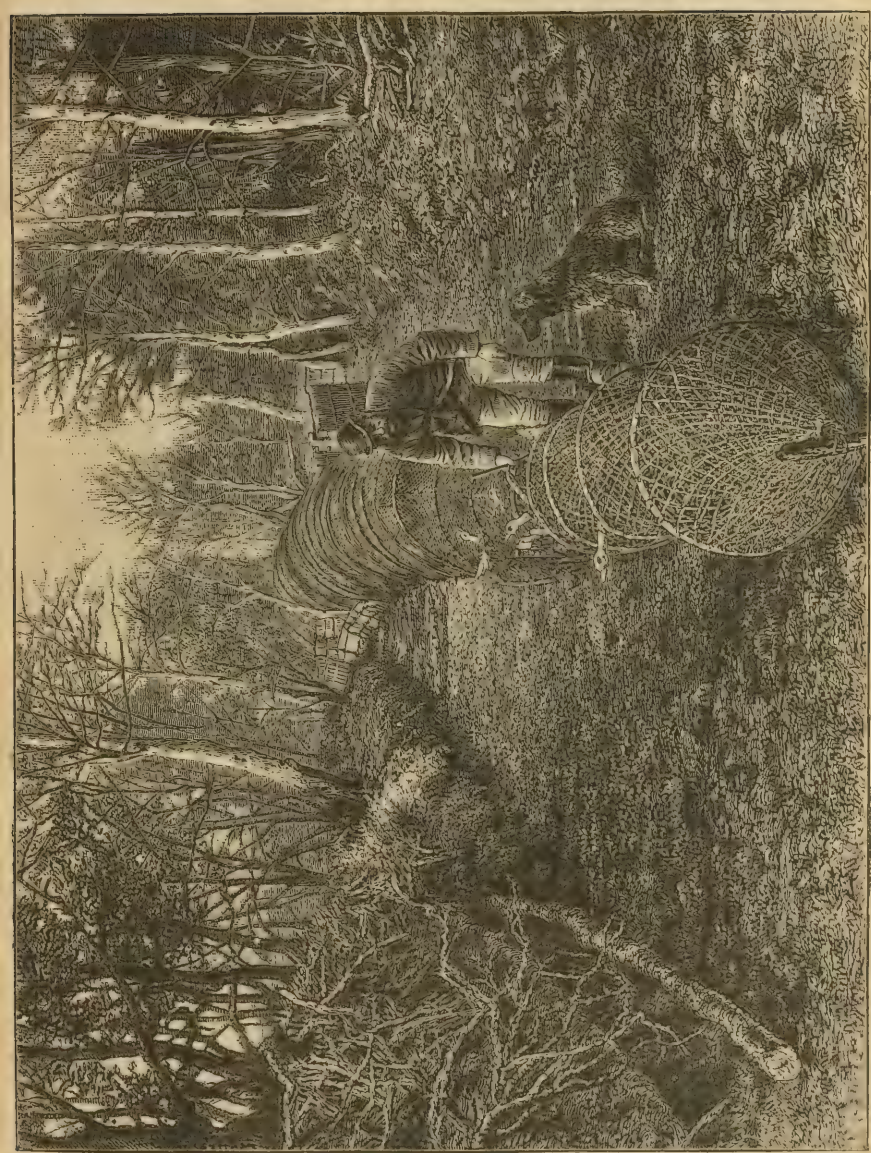

FIG. 3.—THE END OF A PIPE.

I. *North of the Blackwater*, and between the Stour and the Colne, there were formerly no fewer than eleven, namely, Wormingford, Jacques Hall, Pond Hall, Old Decoy, Roydon Hall, Dovercourt, Great Oakley Hall, Old Maze Hall, Horsey Island, Villa Farm near Wivenhoe, and Lion Point, all long since abandoned.

II. *On Mersea Island*, between the Colne and Blackwater, was another. Then *on the north shore of the Blackwater* there were nine, namely, Tolleshurst D'arcy, Old Hall, Tollesbury, and Teal Pond. Goldhunger (2), Solleys, Gore, Skinner's Wick, and Bohun's Hall.

III. *South of the Blackwater*, and between that river and the Crouch, were eight others, namely, Latchington, Steeple, Ramsey, West Wick, East Hall, Glebeland, Marsh House, and Grange.

IV. *South of the Crouch*, and between that river and the Thames, there was a solitary decoy at South Hall, near Paglesham.

Of all these, three only are now existing and in working order, namely, Old Hall, Marsh House, and Grange, a sorry remnant of what was once a flourishing and lucrative business in the eastern portion of the county.

Those who have never seen a decoy worked, or examined the entries in a decoyman's account-book, would scarcely credit what an enormous number of fowl could be taken even on a small pool with only three or four pipes if properly managed. In 1886 I visited the Ashby decoy in Lincolnshire, where three thousand or four thousand birds used to be taken in a season, and in one year 6,059; and yet this decoy had only four pipes and little more than an acre of water.

Even a larger number of birds than this were captured in one season of five months (from September to January inclusive) in a famous decoy in Essex. This was Steeple Decoy, on the south shore of the Blackwater, where, in the very first year of its construction (1714) no less than 7,345 fowl were captured. Of these 675 were duck and mallard, 338 teal, 46 pintail, and 6,286 wigeon. These figures, with other interesting particulars, I extracted from an old account-book relating to this decoy in the possession of Mr. Robert Smith, of Maldon, who, on the application of my friend, Mr. Edward A. Fitch, very kindly allowed me to inspect it. The cost of constructing this decoy and subsequently of enlarging it (as appears by the book in question) amounted altogether to rather more than £300 (£306 14s. 4d.), while the selling price of fowl at that date was nine shillings and sixpence a dozen; so that, if all the birds captured in the first season had been sold at this price, the owners would have made

enough to pay the whole cost of the decoy and have a profit in hand of £115.

As affording a good illustration of the prices paid for materials and labour in Essex in the days of Queen Anne, the first page of this M.S. is not without interest; and those who care for further information on the subject may be referred to the account which I have given of this book in the "Field" of July 5th, 1879, an account which has since been reprinted by Sir R. Payne Gallwey in his recently published "Book of Duck Decoys," wherein all the particulars which are now obtainable concerning the above-mentioned decoys in Essex, will be found.

"*Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis.*"

The reclamation and cultivation of the marshlands, the formation of railways, the improvement in guns, and the great increase in the number of shooters, have each and all contributed to ruin decoys; while the large number of wild-fowl which are brought over from Holland and other parts of the continent every winter render it less than ever necessary for the owners of decoys in this country to incur the expense of maintaining them and paying the wages of a decoy-man. Moreover, in those counties where a large head of game is preserved, and large shooting parties are out during the winter months, "decoying" is out of the question, since absolute quiet must prevail within sight and sound of the decoy pond, or no ducks will stay to be caught.

Now that the number of decoys in Essex has dwindled down to one tenth of their original number, it is interesting to note their former abundance and local position, as well as the causes which have contributed to their gradual disappearance.

Hobby Catching a Swift.—On Tuesday evening (May 15th) I caught a Hobby which was feeding on a Swift. It is now in confinement and becoming fairly tame. The Swift was alive when picked up.—ROBERT BROOKS, The Maltings, Mistley, Essex, in the "Field," June 2nd, 1888. [The speed of the Hobby is very great compared with most birds. We have known one before now to catch a swallow, and a friend had a trained Peregrine Tiercel which caught a Swift.—ED. "Field."]

Musical Tastes in a Robin.—The following may interest some of the readers of the ESSEX NATURALIST; I have never heard anything precisely similar to it. For two successive days last week, while I have been playing the organ in the school chapel, a robin has come in through the open door, attracted, I can hardly doubt, by the music. The little bird, so far from being frightened, has come and sat on a choir seat behind me, at the distance of about three feet from my shoulder, and sang as if on a tree in the open air. The louder I played the more vigorously it sang, and apparently thoroughly enjoyed it; if ever I left off playing it ceased singing also. This went on for some twenty minutes each time. Occasionally it would fly down to the west end and then come up again and sing by my side. It would be interesting to know if such a taste for music has been noticed in these little songsters before.—FRANK B. ROGERS, Felstead School, Essex, October 7th, 1888.

Lathyrus tuberosus, L. in Sussex.—One of the few plants which Essex botanists have fondly claimed as peculiar to our county must, it seems, lose that title to our regard. *Lathyrus tuberosus* the Peas Earth-nut, of which a coloured figure is given in Gibson's "Flora of Essex" has been found by Mr. R. D. Postans, "on the shingle beach at Eastbourne, in full bloom in the first week in August." Mr. F. H. Arnold has some interesting notes on this plant in the October number of "Science Gossip." He says:—"The locality in which the Sussex plant occurs, *i.e.*, the shingle beach at Eastbourne, differs greatly from that mentioned by Gibson, viz., in several corn-fields and also along the hedgebanks and borders of the same fields. The figure of this species as given in Gibson's 'Flora' is a good one, with the exception of the leaflets, which are represented as ovate, whereas they are obovate; but truer to nature than either the engravings of Gibson or Syme is the old woodcut of Gerard, headed '*Terræ glandes*, Pease Earth-nut,' while his verbal description, allowing for the absence of technicalities, is excellent. 'The Pease Earth-nut commeth vp with slender and weake stalkes: the leaues be thin, and little, growing vpon slender stems, with clasping tendrels at the ends, with which it embraceth and taketh hold of such things as stand neere vnto it: the floures on the tops of the stalkes are like to those of Pease, but lesser, of a purple colour, in smell not vnpleasant; in their places cometh vp long cods, in which are three or foure round seeds: the roots be thicke, long, like after a sort of acorns, but much greater, blacke without, gray within, in taste like to the Chess-nut: out of which beneath doth hang a long slender string.' He mentions also that by the Dutch, the curious tubers are called 'tailed mise, of the similitude or likenesse of domesticall mise, which the blacke, round nuts, with the piece of the slender string hanging out behind do represent,' and to a dead and shrivelled mouse they have certainly a quaint resemblance. Gerard states that although this plant is common in Germany, he had not heard of its occurrence in England. [Gibson has an erroneous statement to the effect that Gerard mentions it as a native of England.] In Holland it is stated to be used as an esculent. We have now records of its occurrence in Essex and Sussex, but how it got to either of these localities, so far distant from each other, has not as yet been accounted for."

Colias edusa at Woodford.—As this butterfly appears to have been rare throughout the country during the past season, it may be interesting to note that I caught a specimen (a male) on Woodford Green, on September 7th.—(Master) WILLIAM S. ARGENT, Broomhill, Woodford, Essex, October 6th, 1888. [The "Clouded-Yellow" butterfly has been rare in almost all parts of England since the great *Colias* irruption of 1877. I well remember the immense numbers of the insects in the forest districts in August of that year. In a clover-field belonging to Dr. Sewell, at Woodford Bridge, the butterfly swarmed in an astonishing manner, and literally thousands might have been netted in a day. As the result of three visits to this spot my brothers and myself secured twenty specimens of the rare aberration "*helice*" of the female. The numbers of individuals of such insects as *Vanessa atalanta*, *V. io* and *V. cardui* in and about that field almost surpassed belief, and the spot presented a series of entomological pictures only paralleled in my experience by some of the rides in the New Forest in 1875, with their almost tropical garishment of hundreds of *Argynnis paphia*, *Limenitis sibylla* and other handsome butterflies. *Colias edusa* still frequented the neighbourhood until about the middle of September, and the last specimen noticed by us was on the 27th of that month. Since that time the only living example I have seen was one at Chingford, in August, 1886. The hundreds of thousands of the butterfly which must have flown in Essex in August and September, 1887, utterly disappeared at the end of the season, and left apparently no descendants to delight our eyes in future years. We have had many summers to our senses quite as suitable for the insect; the food-plant is grown in every parish; and stock nonsense about exterminating collectors cannot be imported into such a case as this. Yet so far as I know only solitary sporadic specimens have been seen in the county since the above mentioned memorable season. Few phenomena in the wonderful world of insects are more mysterious than this sudden appearance and disappearance of species of butterflies.—W. COLE.]

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